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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives

Statement submitted by Guild of Service, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.6/2011/1.

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Statement*

1. In our submission to the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women at its fifty-fifth session, the Guild of Service, India, raises critical trends and patterns of concern regarding equal access and participation of widows and their daughters in education and employment for discussion and inclusion in the agreed conclusions:

- Over three quarters of a billion widows and their children live in extreme poverty (one ninth (11 per cent) of the world's population), leading widows to desperate "choices" to feed children, particularly pulling them, particularly daughters, out of school into arranged early marriages and other exploitative situations (begging, child labour, even trafficking).
- Huge and unprecedented recent increases in the numbers of widows are due to increased armed conflicts, ethnic cleansing, HIV/AIDS, "natural" disasters and other negative impacts of climate change and the persistence of harmful traditional practices, such as early marriage and forced marriages.
- More widows increase families living in extreme poverty because discriminatory customs and laws, including lack of inheritance, land and property rights, and expulsion from the marital home, propel many widows into poverty.
- Widows, primarily in rural sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia, face harmful traditional practices such as discrimination, marginalization, mourning rituals which restrict personal autonomy and the mainstreaming of widows economically and socially. Countries legislating against discrimination against widows tend not to enforce such laws.
- Social exclusion of widows has severe economic consequences, additional to that of other women:
    - o While all women are unable to own land or property in certain countries, exacerbating the economics of women in households without adult men, widows are additionally feared as "unlucky", "witches", or causing their husband's death, and ostracized, making it harder for them to find ways to feed their families. Property inheritance laws by tradition and custom discriminate against widows.
    - o While all women are likely to be under-employed and less well paid in comparison to men, exacerbating the economics of all women in households without adult men, widows are additionally constrained from pursuing education, job training or employment by mourning rites requiring widows to remain inside for up to one year or more or an unwritten behaviour code.
    - o Expulsion of widows and their children from a marital home leads many to homelessness, migration, refugee or displacement camps and increased physical insecurity, since widows are often unwelcome in natal homes.
    - o Widows in certain rural areas are forced to marry a male relative of their deceased husband ("widow inheritance" or "levirate marriage").

* Issued without formal editing.

- o Social isolation and avoidance of widows often leads widows to miss training, employment, health care, education and other information and opportunities.
- o Widows and their children face increased gender-based violence in conflict-affected areas as women without the protection of men.

- Removal of daughters from school for early marriage generates a cycle as daughters become uneducated widows replicating mothers' "choices" for *their* children.

2. Education being a primary mechanism for escaping poverty, it is essential that Governments address the social and economic conditions of widowhood, using all measures to afford widows their rights to education, training and employment, and protect the rights of widows' children to attend school. In particular, we seek to:

- Implement the agreements reached at the fifty-fourth session of the Commission on the Status of Women to disaggregate data by marital status as well as gender and age, not only in HIV/AIDS, but also to monitor progress of widows and their children: research on widowhood as a root cause of girls out-of-school and girl dropouts, and include data on child brides, child mothers, child heads of household, and child widows, widowed families living within extended families, and marital status of parents of children at risk (both girls and boys) to identify the disproportionate number who are children of widows.
- Combat legal, customary and traditional discrimination in inheritance laws and property rights and usage rights.
- Implement the outcome of the forty-eighth session of the Commission on the Status of Women to challenge stigmatization and discriminatory attitudes, and include Widowhood, developing campaigns for new standards of behaviour and attitudes towards marriage, the value of education for girls, women's right to work, women's right to inherit and own land, and other human rights.
- Fund widows' groups to ensure widows and their children are informed of education and employment programming, including those who cannot read.
- Design education and training for the hard-to-reach, including widows and their children, particularly those in hiding, homeless, in transit, refugee, internally displaced or humanitarian relief camps, living with disabilities, or otherwise too distant. Plan contingencies for power outages, particularly in rural areas, if strategies involve mobile phones or computers.
- Design retention supports for widows and their children, including childcare at school for children of student mothers and for students after school.
- Ensure that programming for out-of-school youth includes widows and the children of widows.
- Provide rights education and life skills training to parents, including widows, as well as students, and include the rights of widows and other women living without adult men in curricular material.

3. Progress on the agreed conclusions of the fifty-first session of the Commission on the Status of Women, "The elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child", is incomplete until girl widows and the daughters of

widows are included in policies, programmes, outreach, monitoring and data collection. To redress this:

- Redefine campaigns combating child marriage to include child brides becoming child widows and widow inheritance, since inherited widows may still be children.
- Implement paragraph 13 of the agreed conclusions of the fifty-first session of the Commission on the Status of Women calling on Governments to include widows and their children:
    - o Ensure harmful laws include inheritance, land and property laws and other discrimination against widows, including social exclusion (13f).
    - o Develop countrywide birth, death, and marriage registries (13j). Since marriage is the greatest source of HIV infection risk for women, use such registries to target married men, and their wives, former wives (widows, divorced, abandoned) and other sexual partners, requiring both husband and wife, or father and mother, to attend sessions during registration covering HIV/AIDS transmission and prevention, reproductive health, family planning, nutrition, and the importance and availability of birth attendants.
    - o Ensure country reports to the United Nations include marital status and other data on households without adult men (13j).
- Explicitly include widowhood, daughters of widows, girl widows, marital status and households without adult men in:
    - o Every subsection of paragraph 14.
    - o Paragraph 15: encouraging treaty bodies to invite States to address the situation of girls.
    - o The financial commitments of paragraphs 16 and 17.
- Include widowhood as a key paragraph 18 component of the issues facing girls.

4. More generally, we seek support for:

- A United Nations special report on widowhood in conflict collaborating with widows' organizations modelled on the Machel report on children in conflict.
- A United Nations Special Rapporteur on Widowhood.
- The United Nations, Governments' and Donors' funding of widows' groups to represent widows collectively in decision-making, peace negotiations, and on committees for constitutional and law reform; forming widows' groups where none exist.
- Naming the knowledge gap on widows as a major obstacle to gender equality, human rights and the Millennium Development Goals.
- Including marital status in United Nations five-year questionnaires to develop member country profile statistics, disaggregating gender data by marginalized population and marginalized population data by gender.

- Funding alternate data-collection methods (e.g., national mapping and profiling projects), since conventional census methods inadequately capture data on widows.
- The United Nations through the various organizations must make it incumbent on State parties to acknowledge and document various forms of discrimination against widows. State parties must make available surveyed data on all forms of social and economic discrimination of widows.
- A "general recommendation" of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women urging State parties to address widowhood issues in their own countries and questionnaires on widowhood.
- "Widows" as a United Nations Security Council resolution 1325 national action plan implementation category.
- United Nations conferences in Africa and Asia in 2011-2013, on widowhood, human rights, poverty and justice, based on United Nations and international development agency (Commonwealth Secretariat, World Bank) findings on widowhood.
- Mainstreaming widowhood issues into all international and regional policy meetings, including all conferences on human rights, HIV/AIDS, trafficking, peace and security, violence against women, poverty eradication, and least developed countries to effectively implement United Nations system goals.

5. We wish to acknowledge our sister organization Widows for Peace through Democracy and its Founder Director, Margaret Owen, for her support in the writing of this submission.